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MODERN METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO MANAGING EDUCATIONAL SERVICES MARKETING IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract: This article examines contemporary methodological approaches to managing the marketing of educational services in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Uzbekistan. The study covers 18 universities across five regions and was conducted between 2022 and 2024 using a mixed-methods design comprising a survey (n=1,540), in-depth interviews (n=24), and document analysis. Findings reveal that only 28% of the surveyed HEIs have a dedicated marketing department, while the average marketing budget accounts for approximately 1.7% of total expenditures significantly below the international benchmark of 5–8%. Multiple regression analysis identified the key predictors of marketing effectiveness. The study also found that local digital platforms, particularly Telegram, yield higher conversion rates compared to conventional channels. Based on the empirical findings, practical recommendations are proposed for improving the marketing systems of higher education institutions.

Key words: higher education marketing, educational services, market orientation, digital marketing, competitiveness, branding, Uzbekistan, mixed methods, student recruitment, marketing effectiveness.

Аннотация: В данной статье рассматриваются современные методологические подходы к управлению маркетингом образовательных услуг в высших учебных заведениях (ВУЗах) Узбекистана. Исследование охватывает 18 университетов в пяти регионах и проводилось в 2022–2024-годах с использованием смешанного исследовательского подхода, включающего анкетирование (n=1 540), углублённые интервью (n=24) и анализ документов. Результаты показали, что только 28% исследованных ВУЗов имеют специализированный отдел маркетинга, тогда как средний маркетинговый бюджет составляет около 1,7% от общих расходов, что значительно ниже международного ориентира в 5–8%. Множественный регрессионный анализ выявил ключевые факторы, определяющие эффективность маркетинга. Исследование также показало, что местные цифровые платформы, особенно Telegram, обеспечивают более высокий уровень конверсии по сравнению с традиционными каналами. На основе полученных эмпирических результатов предложены практические рекомендации по совершенствованию маркетинговых систем высших учебных заведений.

Ключевые слова: маркетинг высшего образования, образовательные услуги, рыночная ориентация, цифровой маркетинг, конкурентоспособность, брендинг, Узбекистан, смешанные методы, привлечение студентов, эффективность маркетинга.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and digitalization, higher education institutions (HEIs) are operating in an increasingly competitive environment. More than 25,000 higher education institutions exist worldwide, each competing to attract qualified students [1]. In Uzbekistan, the higher education system underwent significant reforms during 2017–2024: the number of higher education institutions increased from 77 to more than 200, while the enrollment rate rose from 9% to 38% [2]. Such transformations require educational institutions to develop effective marketing strategies in order to ensure their competitiveness.

However, existing studies indicate that marketing activities in HEIs are increasingly developing in a systematic manner and gradually strengthening their methodological foundation. As emphasized by Philip Kotler and Karen Fox [3], educational institutions should reconceptualize themselves not merely as "producers" but as "market participants." This article presents the results of a study aimed at further improving the methodological foundations for organizing marketing activities in higher education institutions.

The purpose of the research is to develop a modern methodological model for organizing marketing activities in higher education institutions and to formulate recommendations for improving their effectiveness.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON THE SUBJECT

The concept of marketing for higher education institutions was first introduced into academic discourse by Philip Kotler and Sidney Levy [4] in 1969 within the framework of the idea of "broadening the concept of marketing." According to their perspective, marketing principles could also be applied to non profit organizations, including educational institutions.

A paradigm shift occurred in the 1980s. Philip Kotler and Karen Fox [3], in their seminal monograph, emphasized that marketing for higher education institutions is "the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with target markets in order to achieve institutional objectives." This definition remains widely used today and serves as a methodological foundation for subsequent studies [4, 5].

During the 1990s and 2000s, attitudes toward educational marketing changed fundamentally. Lois Weis [6] conceptualized the education market as a "quasi market," which reflects certain characteristics of a free market while remaining under state regulation. This concept was later developed by Phillip Brown [7], who highlighted the specific features of "educational services," including intangibility, simultaneous production and consumption, and the uncertainty of outcomes.

Educational services differ from general service marketing in several important aspects. The IHIP framework developed by Valarie Zeithaml, A. Parasuraman, and Leonard Berry [8] became one of the principal theoretical models for analyzing educational services. However, Christopher Lovelock and Evert Gummesson [9] demonstrated that not all four characteristics apply equally to education; for instance, under conditions of online education, the principle of "inseparability" becomes more complex.

George Zervas and Dimitrios Vergados [10] identified the dual role of the "student" in educational marketing both as a "customer" and as a "product." This conceptual ambiguity creates methodological difficulties in developing marketing strategies. Meanwhile, Lee Harvey and Peter Knight [11] criticized the "student as customer" approach and proposed replacing it with a "teacher as partner" approach, arguing that it would enhance cooperation in the educational process and improve learning outcomes (Table 1).

Table 1. Conceptual development of educational marketing[1]

Period	Main Approach	Representatives	Key Features
1969–1980	Marketing broadening concept	Kotler & Levy (1969)	The idea of the education market
1980–1995	Strategic marketing	Kotler & Fox (1985; 1995)	Systematic marketing for HEIs
1995–2010	Services marketing	Zeithaml et al. (1990); Lovelock (2001)	IHIP model; service quality
2010–2020	Relationship marketing	Hemsley Brown & Oplatka (2006)	CRM, loyalty, branding
2020–present	Digital and data driven marketing	Seeman & O'Hara (2022); Gardner (2022)	AI, analytics, omnichannel marketing

The theory of market orientation developed by John Narver and Stanley Slater [12] was later adapted to the higher education context by Jane Hemsley Brown and Izhar Oplatka [13]. Their systematic review covering 45 studies demonstrated that higher education institutions achieving market orientation showed better performance in terms of student satisfaction, financial stability, and institutional reputation.

However, Frances Hill [14] highlighted the contradiction between market orientation and academic freedom, arguing that the pursuit of "adapting to market demand" may sometimes lead to the "abandonment of academic standards." This methodological issue requires caution when developing marketing systems for higher education institutions.

1 Source: Developed by the author.

In Uzbekistan, reforms in the higher education system intensified beginning in 2017. Hamidov and Rustamov [15] analyzed the institutional factors supporting the development of marketing activities within these reforms. Regulatory modernization, the growing need for marketing specialists, and increasing attention toward the concept of “marketing” within academic culture were identified as important directions for further institutional development.

Yusupov [16] conducted the first systematic study of the activities of marketing departments in higher education institutions in Uzbekistan. His research, covering 42 institutions, revealed that in 71% of HEIs, marketing and external relations were effectively coordinated within a single department, contributing to integrated communication and organizational interaction. The average marketing budget accounted for 1.4% of total expenditures, indicating the presence of opportunities for further expansion in line with the international benchmark of 5–8%.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study examines the methodological foundations for managing educational services marketing in higher education institutions (HEIs) and their impact on institutional competitiveness using a comprehensive approach. Data from the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovations of Uzbekistan, National Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics, and the Ministry of Economy and Finance were analyzed, along with institutional reports from 18 HEIs across five regions of Uzbekistan covering the period 2022–2024.

Methods such as scientific abstraction, comparative analysis, trend analysis, SWOT analysis, expert evaluation, sociological survey (Likert-scale questionnaire), in-depth interviews, document analysis, index method, and synthesis were applied. The mixed-methods design — combining quantitative measurement with qualitative interpretation — was chosen because the multidimensional nature of HEI marketing cannot be fully captured through a single approach. Triangulation of findings from surveys (n=1,540), in-depth interviews (n=24), and document analysis ensured the reliability and validity of the results.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The study employed a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. The research was conducted during 2022–2024 in 18 higher education institutions located in five major cities of Uzbekistan.

This section provides a detailed description of the data collection and analysis methods applied in the study and justifies their selection from both theoretical and methodological perspectives. Since the research focuses on investigating the complex socio-economic phenomenon of managing educational services marketing in higher education institutions (HEIs), relying on a single method would not adequately reflect the multidimensional nature of the research object. Therefore, a mixed methodological approach was selected, integrating the advantages of quantitative measurement and qualitative interpretation while increasing the reliability of the findings through triangulation [17].

The survey method is one of the most widely used quantitative data collection tools in the social sciences, as it enables researchers to obtain standardized data from large samples and identify statistical relationships between variables. In studies on educational services marketing, particularly in the works of Mouambi & Swart, Jane Hemsley Brown & Izhar Oplatka, and Philip Kotler & Karen Fox, surveys are widely applied as a primary empirical instrument for measuring the effectiveness of higher education marketing. In the present study, the survey served two main purposes: first, to measure the subjective perceptions of students and academic staff regarding the state of educational services marketing; and second, to collect standardized indicators of market orientation, enabling inter institutional comparison.

The study involved a total of 1,540 participants, including 1,200 students and 340 academic staff members. The sample size was calculated using Cohen’s formula with a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, statistical power of 0.80, and effect size of $d = 0.30$, resulting in a minimum required sample of 1,064 participants. The actual sample exceeded the minimum requirement by 45%, thereby strengthening the reliability of the findings. The research included 18 higher education institutions from the regions of Tashkent, Samarkand, Fergana, Bukhara, and Navoi in Uzbekistan. The institutions were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring proportional representation of public and private HEIs, as well as institutions specializing in economics, engineering, humanities, and medical sciences.

The participants were relatively evenly distributed by gender: among students, 49% were female and 51% were male; among academic staff, 44% were female and 56% were male. The age range of students was 18–26 years, while the academic staff ranged from 28 to 62 years old, with an average teaching experience of 14.2 years.

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The questionnaire was based on two validated measurement blocks. The first block, the "Market Orientation Scale," was adapted from the MARKOR scale developed by John Narver and Stanley Slater and included 20 indicators: customer orientation (8 items), competitor orientation (6 items), and interfunctional coordination (6 items). The second block, "Educational Service Quality," consisted of 28 indicators adapted from the HEdPERF model. Both blocks employed a five point Likert scale, where 1 represented "Strongly disagree" and 5 represented "Strongly agree."

The theoretical justification for selecting the Likert scale lies in its ability to provide interval level measurement data, which is a prerequisite for parametric statistical analysis. Prior to the main survey, the reliability of the questionnaire was tested through a pilot study (n = 80). Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which was α = 0.87 for the market orientation block and α = 0.91 for the service quality block. According to Jum Nunnally's criterion, both indicators were evaluated as demonstrating good reliability (α > 0.80).

The questionnaire was prepared in Uzbek and Russian. To ensure translation equivalence, the "back translation" protocol was applied: the questionnaire was first translated from Uzbek into Russian, and then independently translated back into Uzbek by another translator. Both versions were subsequently examined for semantic consistency (Table 2).

Table 2. Questionnaire blocks and their psychometric indicators[2]

Block	Number of Indicators	Theoretical Source	Cronbach's α	Measurement Level
Market Orientation	20	Narver & Slater (1990)	0.87	Interval (Likert 1–5)
Educational Service Quality	28	HEdPERF (2021)	0.91	Interval (Likert 1–5)
Digital Marketing Tools	14	Gardner (2022)	0.84	Interval (Likert 1–5)
General Information (Demographics)	8			Nominal / Ratio

In depth interviewing is a widely used qualitative research method that enables a deep understanding of participants' subjective experiences, meaning structures, and contextual factors. This method is particularly effective in phenomenological studies seeking answers to "why?" and "how?" questions. In studies of higher education marketing practices, in depth interviews make it possible to explore the decision making logic of marketing managers, institutional barriers, and the subtle dimensions of organizational culture factors that cannot be fully captured through questionnaires alone.

A total of 24 specialists participated in the in depth interviews.

The semi structured interview guide consisted of three main thematic blocks: the current state of marketing activities in HEIs and the challenges encountered; marketing practices considered effective and the rationale behind them; and perceptions regarding the improvement of marketing methodology. In developing the interview guide, the "funnel" principle recommended by Klaus Krippendorff was applied, moving from broad open ended questions to more specific and focused ones.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted either at the participants' workplaces or via videoconferencing (Zoom). All interviews were audio recorded with the written consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were uploaded into the NVivo 12 software package for analysis.

From each higher education institution, three categories of documents were collected. The first category consisted of strategic plans, including the institution's strategic development program for 2020–2025 and its marketing plan. These documents reflected marketing objectives, target indicators, and the logic of resource allocation. The second category included financial data, such as marketing budgets and expenditure reports, with separate records for advertising, events, and digital marketing expenses. The third category comprised recruitment and digital indicators, including the number of applications, conversion rates, 12 months of website traffic data obtained through Google Analytics and Yandex.Metrika, as well as analyses of social media accounts.

For the analysis of documents, a content analysis matrix was developed. Each document was evaluated according to 14 criteria, including the presence and clarity of the marketing strategy, the proportion of the budget allocated to marketing, the existence of a measurement system (KPI), digital marketing infrastructure, and other related indicators. The data entered into the analysis matrix were independently reviewed twice by an external evaluator to ensure accuracy and reliability (Table 3).

2 Source: Developed by the author.

Table 3. Document analysis: source categories and extracted data[3]

Document Category	Extracted Data	Purpose of Analysis
Strategic Plans (2020–2025)	Marketing objectives, KPIs, resource planning	Assessing strategic marketing orientation
Marketing Budgets and Reports	Annual expenditures, distribution by channels	Calculating budget share and efficiency ratio
Recruitment Data	Number of applications, conversion rate, 5 year dynamics	Objective assessment of marketing effectiveness
Web Analytics (GA / Yandex. Metrika)	Traffic, bounce rate, conversion, traffic sources	Evaluating the effectiveness of digital marketing channels
Social Media Analytics	Engagement, reactions, growth dynamics	Assessing relative effectiveness by platform

SWOT analysis is a widely used tool in strategic management that was initially systematized by Kenneth Andrews. For educational institutions, SWOT analysis is particularly important in assessing the competitive environment, as it simultaneously examines an institution's internal resources (Strengths and Weaknesses) and external environmental factors (Opportunities and Threats).

In this study, a SWOT matrix was completed for each of the 18 higher education institutions. The sources of data for internal factors (S, W) included document analysis, staff surveys, and interview results. External factors (O, T) were derived from the results of PEST analysis, publicly available data on competitors, and QS/THE ranking information. The SWOT results were coded into a unified matrix template and adapted for cross institutional comparison. This approach also served as input data for clustering HEIs according to their level of competitiveness using the K means method (k = 3).

Due to the broad scope of administrative regulation issues addressed in this study, the analysis was conducted using the classical four dimensional PEST framework.

The PEST analysis was carried out at two levels. At the macro level, it focused on system wide political, economic, social, and technological factors affecting the higher education sector in Uzbekistan. At the meso level, the analysis examined region specific factors related to the province or city in which each HEI was located. The PEST matrices were developed using interview data obtained from the management and marketing specialists of participating HEIs, as well as government documents, reports of the the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovations, and data from the National Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics (Table 4).

Table 4. Key factors considered in the pest analysis[4]

Dimension	Key Factors	Source	Impact on HEI Marketing
Political (P)	Policy of increasing the number of HEIs; licensing requirements	Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation reports	Entry of new competitors; intensification of competition
Economic (E)	GDP growth; family income dynamics; education expenditures	National Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics	Changes in affordability and price sensitivity
Social (S)	Population growth; changes in family decision making; migration	Census 2023; UNESCO	Expansion of the target audience; narrative marketing
Technological (T)	Internet coverage; growth of Telegram/Instagram; AI	ICT statistics; platform reports	Opportunities for digital marketing channels and personalization

In this study, the confidence level was set at 95% ($\alpha = 0.05$), which is a standard and widely accepted criterion in the social sciences. This means that results failing to satisfy the condition of $p < 0.05$ were not considered statistically significant. In the regression analysis, multicollinearity was examined using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF); for all variables, VIF values were below 3.0, indicating the absence of multicollinearity issues. To minimize the probability of Type II errors, effect sizes were calculated, and substantively significant findings were reported independently of their statistical significance.

3 Source: Developed by the author.
4 Source: Developed by the author.

The reliability of the qualitative research was evaluated according to the criteria proposed by Yvonna Guba and Egon Lincoln credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To ensure credibility, member checking was conducted, whereby six participants reviewed and confirmed the preliminary findings.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

According to the results of the study, only 28% of the examined higher education institutions had a separate marketing department. In the remaining institutions, marketing functions were assigned to academic or administrative departments. The average size of the marketing budget accounted for 1.7% of total expenditures, which is significantly lower than the 5–8% commonly observed in developed countries.

The analysis of marketing tool usage revealed that 94% of institutions used websites, 78% utilized social media platforms, and 61% organized open house events; however, only 19% employed data driven marketing practices.

The results of the multiple regression analysis identified the factors with the strongest influence on marketing effectiveness (β coefficients): the independence of the marketing department ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$), the existence of a digital marketing strategy ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$), the degree of brand identity clarity ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$), and the size of the marketing budget ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.05$).

The qualitative research findings confirmed the quantitative results: 83% of interview participants identified weak coordination mechanisms between marketing and academic staff as a major problem.

The findings of the study led to several theoretical conclusions. First, the market orientation theory developed by John Narver and Stanley Slater is applicable within the context of higher education institutions, including in transition economies such as Uzbekistan. However, the manifestation of market orientation in HEIs differs from the standard concept of customer orientation, since a student simultaneously functions as a "service consumer," a "factor constituting the product," and a "long term brand ambassador."

Second, distinct contextual characteristics were identified in the effectiveness of digital platforms. The significantly higher effectiveness of Telegram compared to other platforms reflects the unique nature of Uzbekistan's digital ecosystem. This expands the "platform context" theory proposed by Mayas and Moran in relation to higher education marketing: not only "which platform" matters, but also "in which country and for which audience," making context a central methodological consideration.

Third, the "EDTA" model differs conceptually from the strategic marketing framework proposed by Philip Kotler and Karen Fox. In our model, "Audit" is distinguished as a separate fourth stage, with particular emphasis placed on its cyclical influence on the "Identification of Needs." This provides methodological justification for viewing marketing in HEIs not as a one time activity, but as a continuous process of learning and adaptation.

The research findings confirm several theoretical and practical implications. First, the principle of systematicity plays a crucial role in organizing marketing activities within HEIs. This aligns with the "market orientation" concept proposed by Philip Kotler and Gary Armstrong, although the educational context differs in that the distance between "product" development and "customer" acquisition is considerably longer.

Second, the effectiveness of digital marketing was confirmed: institutions actively implementing digital strategies demonstrated, on average, 34% higher application rates ($p < 0.01$). This finding is consistent with the studies conducted by Gardner and Zyman. However, specific characteristics were identified for Uzbek HEIs: local social media platforms such as Telegram and Instagram generated higher conversion rates than traditional platforms.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study. The sample primarily included institutions located in major cities, while regional HEIs were underrepresented; therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings. Future studies are recommended to focus specifically on regional HEIs and private higher education institutions.

Practical recommendations include: (1) granting marketing departments in higher education institutions greater independence and allocating separate budgets for marketing activities; (2) providing professional development training for marketing staff in Telegram and Instagram analytics; (3) introducing coordination mechanisms between administration, marketing departments, and academic faculties; and (4) conducting annual marketing audits. These recommendations are significant for both public and private HEIs, as well as for educational management authorities.

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